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LABELS AND DIGNITIES.
DESIGNATING THE OTHER-
NESS IN POST-COLONIAL
MEDITERRANEAN

In 1955, when a Moroccan writer Driss Chraïbi published his second novel, *Les Boucs*,¹ the reaction of the critics, initially, was perplexity. Literary talent was hard to be denied, but it was not easy to put up with such a violent and intransigent vision. The new book was just as hard and vehement in its literary expression as the first one, *Passé simple*, published a year earlier and causing an equal scandal in France and in Morocco.² In *Les Boucs* Chraïbi deals with the difficulties faced by the North-African workers in France, a reality lived at that moment by some 300 000 people. He presents without any intent of euphemism the misery of the first generation of immigrants and their alienation culminating in an outburst of violence directed against the surrounding social and cultural context. The situation of the Chraïbian heroes is that of utmost despair, moral and material destitution. To steal a piece of meat or to eat a rat is just one of the choices they face every day. No wonder that their isolation among the inhabitants of Villejuif is complete. A residuum of hate contaminates even love and solidarity with beings representing the only alliances of the immigrant in the country that he cannot transform in a new homeland: a cat and a woman who, for reasons beyond comprehension, chose to live with him. In a short critical note marking the publication of this book, Chester W. Obuchowski commented that “acid is poured on a wound that invites an antiseptic.”³

Indeed, Chraïbi’s novel understandably could be qualified as corrosive. But, if we can clear enough what the acid is, what kind of antiseptic should be used instead? If the language of this novel, undoubtedly strong of flavor, is judged as something that

¹ Driss Chraïbi, *Les Boucs*, Paris: Denoël, 1955.

² The causes of this double scandal are clarified by Danielle Marx-Scouras: “Still considered the most controversial work of the «Generation of ’52,» this imputative text was aimed as much at Moroccan, patriarchal society as at French colonial rule. The author’s compatriots accused him of having betrayed his country at a time when it was seeking independence from France, whereas French critics and journalists cited *Le Passé simple* to justify the preservation of the French Protectorate in Morocco. Disturbed by the controversy surrounding his novel, Chraïbi publicly disowned it in 1957, only to regret his action later”; Danielle Marx-Scouras, “A Literature of Departure: The Cross-Cultural Writing of Driss Chraïbi,” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), p. 131.

³ Chester W. Obuchowski, “*Les Boucs* by Driss Chraïbi,” *Books Abroad*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Summer, 1956), p. 301.

should be avoided, what could be a better way of speaking about the post-colonial relations? My aim in this article is to attempt a reflection on diverse modalities of speaking: languages and discourses, with special attention given to literature understood as a privileged tool of establishing new discursivities not only in service of the dominant, but also in defense of the dominated and the losers. The objective of indicating the best antiseptic is of course out of my range; instead, I can realistically expect to be able to analyze the opportunities and the perspectives brought about by diverse situations of writing (immigrant writing, female writing, writing in French, writing against modernization, against civilization, against tradition, and so on). Their utmost finality is to supply a missing category: the self-designation of groups that had been marginalized by historical, social, economical factors and circumstances present in the post-colonial Mediterranean. Some of these circumstances are directly caused by the colonial past, some are inherent to the present migrations, some other remain deeply rooted in the idiosyncrasies of traditional societies.

If we think about a discursive antiseptic to be poured on the wound opened by the conflict that accompanied the end of French protectorate and the emergence of North-African presence on the European ground, a ready-made solution seems to be at hand. A specific modality of speaking called political correctness is brought into play to deal with such problems. The “doctrine” of PC rose to popular usage in the early 80ies in the United States and is supposed to have declined in the late 90ies. Nevertheless, the basic mechanisms implied by political correctness present much wider historical and geographical extension, and for sure Europe in search of a multicultural paradise has become one of the main polygons for its testing.

The “hard core” of the PC seems to be well known: it consists in preventing people from being offended. Nonetheless, the politically correct formula is merely based upon euphemistic language attitudes and purely formal rights. As Norman Fairclough says, it is “no more than a constructed homogeneity produced through the labeling.”⁴ Like all euphemisms, politically correct labels continue masking dissimilarity instead of identifying realities in a precise and adequate way. Political correctness is thus a form of manipulation. The real objective is not to give to the underprivileged any kind of social or cultural comfort, but to assimilate them to some artificial standard that serves the interests of the dominating cultural power. As the whole mechanism reduces the difference to a kind of safe and sterile “the-sameness,” the identities and identifications judged to be unsettling can be silenced. At the same time, the new labels, supposed to be more elegant, transmit similar kind of symbolic violence as that implied by the colonial “orientalizing,” in the sense given to this term by Edward Said.⁵ As long as groups or communities remain included in nebulous and summary categories, they do not find their own place on the imaginary map of the world. Geographically, socially and cognitively, they remain in the outskirts.

Allegedly, the PC is free from any intention of symbolic violence. Nonetheless, it can be argued that its euphemistic vocabulary is based on mechanisms of diluting and

⁴ Norman Fairclough, “Political Correctness: the Politics of Culture and Language,” *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14 (2003), p. 17.

⁵ Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

masking the difference to which the proper name is denied. Political correctness, just as its colonial predecessors, consists in imposing artificially designed labels and dubs that are supposed to sound neutral and somehow “administrative,” but quickly assume hidden meanings and pejorative connotations. In consequence, constant recycling of euphemistic tags intended to mask unsolved problems is a well known phenomenon accompanying the usage of the PC language. As long as it is used, the boundaries of the old and the new categories remain the same, but the labeling changes kaleidoscopically.

The end of colonial era and the emergence of the new phenomenon of working immigration brought about numerous vocabulary shifts. During the 50ties and the 60ties in France – I will return to this point later on – there had been an intent to substitute the denomination „Arabe”, charged pejoratively during the previous, colonial period, with the euphemism „Nord-Africain,” abbreviated to “Noraf.” Nonetheless, both terms are analogical in their internal structure of meaning. Their usage doesn’t take into consideration the complexity of ethnic distinctions and plurality of identities that exist. People and peoples are packed together under a common tag that can easily be charged with belittlement or spite. Similarly, in post-colonial Portugal (i.e. after 1975), all the inhabitants of the former African colonies used to be called “pretos,” which is nothing else than euphemistic Ersatz of the former, colonial designation “negros.” The post-colonial shift is symptomatic, as the Portuguese adjective designating the color “preto” refers to a less intense hue,⁶ while “negro” designates a deep blackness. Meanwhile, during the 90ties, numerous persons of African origin preferred to return, perhaps in a gesture of provocation, to the former, colonially connoted expression, ostensibly calling themselves “negros.” Doing so, perhaps they tried to unmask the fact that the refreshed label did not bring the solution of the racial problem, did not eliminate the prejudices. On the other hand, this choice of the word could manifest that the black are proud to continue as black as they were before. It is possible to observe a kind of “radicalism” in naming themselves that the members of minorities oppose to the euphemistic discourse of the political correctness. I believe that much of the verbal crudity of the Chraïbian novels could be read as a literary analogy of this phenomenon.

It can be argued that the authentic will of recognizing everybody’s right not only to self-determination (indicating the category in which one wishes to be included), but also to self-designation (creating a new, more adequate category for oneself) should go in the opposite direction to the policy of political correctness. But in fact groups and individuals rarely establish their own identities “from inside,” by a simple, autonomous decision. In most cases, persons and peoples must settle for the names given to them by strangers; these names often happened to be pejoratively charged. Undoubtedly, it is an interesting research field not only for social linguistics, but also for literary criticism. As mentioned above, literature is a powerful tool of creating categorizations; it can serve both the hegemonic powers and the ex-colonized or the migrants in search of their lost identities. It permits to the creative individuals to give a name to themselves

⁶ Also further shifts in the same direction were possible: the adjective “preto” was sometimes substituted by “oscuro” (“dark”) and “moreno” (dark-haired), terms judged by some users as more “polite.”

and to their communities, instead of being named, and to designate their own place on the imaginary map before such place is assigned to them by others. It is a process full of doubts and interrogation marks. Identities, diluted or undermined during the colonial period, undergo further reshaping in the globalized, migrating world. It is thus a bi-directional quest, revisiting past identities, destroyed by the colonial cleansing, and at the same time facing the future, as the emergence of new bonds and identifications can be quickly and sensitively reflected in the literary work.

From the point of view of the former colonized, finding the adequate identity name is by no means obvious, as it is placed in a kind of void between past and future. The history of “verbal hegemony” of the Europeans over the world is quite long. A close relationship between maritime expansion and linguistic re-categorization of the world discovered and dominated by the Europeans was established as early as in the 15th century, at the time of the first fortresses built on the African coast by the Portuguese. During the subsequent history of maritime expansion, one by one, the territories and the peoples who used to inhabit them were symbolically taken into possession by the European explorers who gave them names – evidently, without the slightest regard to how these peoples and places used to be called before their coming. The advent of the first European was believed to set a reference point from which the process of categorizing the reality was supposed to start. Unexplored world was regarded as a shapeless *tabula rasa*. As the exploration progressed, names had been imposed: not only to each geographical reality, but also to each human collectivity that the Europeans encountered on their way.

In spite of the early Portuguese incursions, that ended with the Moroccan victory at Alcácer Quibir in 1578, the Maghreb preserved its independence longer than other parts of the world. But the 19th and 20th century reality of nearly universal hegemony of colonial powers didn't leave this region unaffected, bringing about the European presence, penetrating deeply not only the political and material life, but also the mentality of dominated populations. Among other forms of exploitation and symbolic violence, the question of labels and designations might seem relatively unimportant, but it deserves to be analyzed because of its lasting consequences.

In any colonial circumstances, no one used to ask the colonized what his or her identity was nor by what name he or she wished to be treated. On the contrary, numerous forms of symbolic violence consisted precisely in attributing, arbitrarily, new names: from “christening” of slaves to lumping different ethnic, religious or other identities to create new, summary categories. The empires needed a conceptual map of the world to fit the European eyes and mind. Peoples and countries received names that served imperial interests or simply appeared useful to metropolitan scholars. In his famous study, *Orientalism*, Edward Said analyzed the process of constructing the artificial category of the “East,” in which extensive parts of the world appeared as melted together. The operation had for objective not only to make the world more comprehensible for the European settlers and agents; it was also an efficient strategy designed to prevent the opposition of the “re-named” Orientals against the empires or any attempt towards a possible emancipation. The literature became an important tool in this process of diluting identities and distinctions which were judged unwelcome from the imperial point of view. Another form of colonial violence consisted in impos-

ing a re-categorization of space units in such a way that whole countries and nations could virtually disappear not only from the map, but also from the conceptual scheme of the world. In her book *Imperial Knowledge*,⁷ Ewa Thompson showed, among other examples, that in *War and Peace* by Tolstoy such entities as Polish or Czech nations virtually cease to exist as named, thus discernible realities; there is no place for them in the imaginary layout of space and time called into existence by the literary work. The fall into oblivion of entire ethnic groups remains a real danger also in the contemporary, post-colonial reality. Many of the Maghrebian tribes and other groups of people, such as communities of ex-slaves, are still “unspeakable” identities, absent from political and academic discourses. The same could be the case of groups of people forced into migration, that can easily enter the category of “human waste” as the outcasts of the modernizing world, about whom and for whom Zygmunt Bauman speaks.⁸ Human beings still can be de-categorized and un-named in order to be pushed out of the imaginary map of the consuming world, individually or as groups.

The post-colonial vocabulary of identities is a complex structure resulting from the overlapping networks of categories imposed by the ex-empires and the attempts at its deconstruction or revision done by the ex-colonized, who are no longer reduced to silence. The general result of the colonial era is a great conceptual mess. On one hand, imposing simplified ethnic or cultural categorizations was a frequent form of symbolic violence, leading to wipe out identities; existence and irreducibility of groups and communities was silenced by including peoples into artificial, generalizing classes. But the opposite was true as well: particularisms were inflated in order to divide strong identities into smaller ones, according to the well-known maxim *Divide et impera*. Unfortunately, the post-colonial search for self-designation cannot be seen as a simple process of re-establishing the identity concepts as they existed before. Most often, the pre-colonial is rather a mythical *illo tempore* than a concrete reality to which it could be feasible to return in the contemporary conditions. The interruption of cultural continuity was too long and too deep for simple restitutions and reconstructions. For this reason, the whole process of post-colonial categorization is to be seen not only as a claim for recognition, but also as a laborious search for identities and designations on which little or no consensus exists.

The former layout of identities had been diluted; the new ones are still taking shape, strongly influenced by Europe. The whole process is on one hand marked by problems and resentments that originated from European hegemony and on the other hand inspired by European models and paradigms. For example, the ancestral arrangement of tribal identities is suppressed by a new scheme of national ones (also the later still in formation and redefinition). Under the European influence, the concept of tribe and the wish to accentuate tribal bonds tends to be stigmatized as “anti-modern”; the quest for identities situated at this level is often seen as somehow improper, inadequate or simply

⁷ Ewa Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, London: Greenwood Press, 2000; *Trubadurzy imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm*, trans. Anna Sierszulska, Kraków: Universitas, 2000.

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004.

dangerous in the contemporary conditions.⁹ As it should be noted for impartiality's sake, this situation is susceptible to be considered by non-Europeans as a persistent prejudice that still cripple some forms of search for identity, both in different regions of Africa and elsewhere in the world. In the meanwhile, the borders between states, which often appeared as a result of former negotiations between colonial powers, still split ancestral, tribal units. For this reason, if we choose to think in terms of politics, tribal bonds are to be seen as a permanent source of instability. In post-colonial reality, there exist two different, overlapping layouts, causing numerous problems of identification. Also the migratory phenomena, so strongly pronounced in the Mediterranean area, obviously pose further questions of belonging and state loyalty. These meanders of identification, often silenced in official discourse, do find their proper place in the literary moods of reflection and interrogation.

Before reading the texts, it is important to notice that the whole literary phenomenon gave rise to many doubts concerning the proper designation that should be ascribed to it. Jean Déjeux commented that the Maghrebian literature written in French is "neither indigenous nor national, and for this reason it poses a serious problem for Arabic-language critics as well as for a foreign observer."¹⁰ Thus he summarized different proposals for its designation that had appeared since the 50ties: "littérature marocaine de langue véhiculaire française" (Kacem Basfao), "littérature d'expression arabe mais de langue française" (Ahmed Lanasri), "littérature d'écriture française" or "de graphie française" (Jean Sénac), "littérature arabe écrite en français" (André Miquel).¹¹ The sheer number of proposals and, at least in some cases, their ingeniousness reveal the problematic character of the Arab-European literary space. The problem of "writing" ("écriture", "graphie") seems to be crucial for many of these designations, rather paradoxically, because also the Arabic has a long tradition as a written and literary language. On the other hand, the "vehicular" quality of the language is accentuated. It seems that the question of language is crucial as it permits to "get through" to a determined public. What public?

Writing in French is indeed a strategical option. It means that the literature is destined to "travel north"¹² instead of reaching different contexts inside the Arabic world, formerly divided in zones of influence by several European nations. The Maghrebian literature written in French could reach, without passing through the filter of trans-

⁹ Tribal identities have been strongly stigmatized by the partisans of the North-African modernization during the post-colonial period. Abdelwahab Meddeb, one of the most prominent Tunisian intellectuals of the present moment, does not hesitate to report this hostility of the modernizers towards the tribal world, as he characterizes the great lines of the Tunisian history leading to the revolutionary upheaval in 2011: the creation of the modern state, inspired by Bourguiba, implied the necessity of destroying "the tribal spirit moved by an instinct of disobedience" ("éradiquer l'esprit tribal mû par l'instinct de la désobéissance"); cf. Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Printemps de Tunis. La métamorphose de l'Histoire*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2011, p. 15.

¹⁰ Jean Déjeux, "Francophone Literature in the Maghreb: The Problem and the Possibility," *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), p. 5.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 5–6.

¹² On the symbolical importance of this geographical direction, see the pertinent study by Mustapha Hamil, "Mohamed Zafzaf's «Al-Mar'a wa-l-warda» or the Voyage North in the Post-colonial Era," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (August, 2006), pp. 417–430.

lation, Paris as the first destination, and then some parts of the Arabic world, such as, e.g., Lebanon. But it has to be translated in order to be read in such areas as, e.g., the Gulf countries. Obviously it puts an additional obstacle and postpones the reception by the public (in fact, such a reception arguably happened as late as well after the turn of the millennium, belated by half a century, if referred to the beginnings of the Maghrebian literary boom).

The choice of writing in French implies remaining circumscribed in the boundaries traced by the former European empires. Seemingly, a disempowering option. What did the Maghrebian authors gain with transforming the order of European protectorates into the post-colonial literary space? Of course, there was much to be gained with joining the European book market and its stable, reliable networks of literary circulation, lecture, criticism and scholarship. The vital importance of joining these networks is still patent nowadays in some non-Arabic contexts, such as, e.g., the case of Portuguese speaking literature in Africa. For many ex-Portuguese colonies, joining the political and cultural project of Lusophony proposed by Lisbon in the late 90ies is an option without captivating alternative. The Portuguese remains not only the main literary, but also the main written language, facing a large variety of vernaculars, still confined to the sphere of oral communication. In 2004, an intellectual from the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, Inocência Mata, were still deploring the dependence of the African literature, sponsored by the ex-metropolis: "What does the Mozambican public know from the contemporary Angolan literature? And the other way around? Only that what is presented at the fairs realized by the Portuguese Institute of Book and Reading in the Five [Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa]."¹³ The weakness of the local book markets seems to exclude any project of breaking this vital arrangement; the advantages are far more important than the haunting spirits of mental dependence. But the case of Arabic-speaking world is by no means as hopeless as that of the Lusophone Africa. First of all, instead of variety of local languages, there exist a "monolith" of Arabic, language with an ancient and powerful literary tradition. Its dialectal diversity basically remains confined to the domain of oral usage, while the written Arabic is considered as universal, "civilizational" language. Why is it still not always chosen as a main tool of expression by the contemporary Arab authors?

Paradoxically, the choice of writing in French could be seen, at least in some cases, not only as a post-colonial gesture of "writing back" to the ex-metropolis, dictated by unsolved problems of mental dependance, but also as a fully conscious tentative of crossing the borders of the Arabic civilization. Writing in French would become, in these cases, an act of resistance against the spiritual damages caused both by the strangers and the domestic forces. As Hédi André Bouraoui remarks, "The oppression of colonialism was, though unpardonable, in a sense natural: the colonizer is there for the purpose of exploitation. But the exploitation from within is insidious and unnatural."¹⁴ For this reason, the whole group of francophone writers, considered by

¹³ Inocência Mata, *A Soave Patria*, Lisboa: Colibri, 2004, p. 38.

¹⁴ Hédi André Bouraoui, "Creative Project and Literary Projection in Francophone North Africa," *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), p. 87.

the Tunisian/Canadian scholar as “the critics of the *sequels* of the colonialism,”¹⁵ formulate in fact a double criticism, directed both “inward” and “outward”, dealing with the domestic problems as well as those related to the ex-metropolis. Very often, this criticism leads to a desperate search of some kind of “third way,” as both the traditional and the modern ones lead into a bitter disenchantment.

The first example of a novel touching this question that comes to mind to any reader of Maghrebian literature is obviously *Civilisation, ma Mère!...* by Driss Chraïbi,¹⁶ a book giving a quasi-autobiographical¹⁷ account of the adventure of schooling as cross-civilizational initiation, lived by a child born to an illiterate mother in a Moroccan village. The enthusiasm of the child fascinated with values he brings from school is doomed; with time, this initial attitude of assent would have to suffer deep modifications. In the meanwhile, the ancestral order became impaired by the confrontation with supposed excellence of the civilization. In consequence of this experience, the dimension of plenitude and primordial harmony is lost; the world splits in two discordant spheres: tradition and modernity, both of them imperfect and insufficient.

In even more accentuated way, this double, anti-European and anti-Islamic criticism (understood as criticism directed against the hypocrisy characterizing the figures related to the dominant, religious and patriarchal establishment) is lead by other Moroccan writers, such as Tahar ben Jelloun. In *Moha le Fou, Moha le Sage*,¹⁸ the dualism of European and Islamic civilization is solved by the introduction of a third element, the “voice of the earth” impersonated by Moha himself. This personage of *rawi*, a story-teller, wise and mad, – better to say wise by the wisdom his madness conveys to him –, belongs to the oral culture opposed to both spheres of writing, the Arabic and the French one.

The situation of the Maghrebian man as presented in this novel is that of a double oppression, caused, so to say, by the past and by the future. The burden of the former is more than just the colonial trauma; it is also the insufficiency of the traditional society, bringing about diverse forms of injustice, legitimized by local customs and the hypocrisy of the dominating religious establishment. But the burden of the future is even greater. The modernization solves none of the old problems; to make things worse, it destroys the remaining institutions that the Maghrebian culture created to moderate the abuse. The *rawi* used to be a medium giving voice to the victims: enslaved women, homeless children, peasants not receiving their share of water. Moha is equally unwanted by those who represent the past and those who represent the future. No wonder that also the instance trying to control Moha is double: his old father, a local patriarch abusing at his pleasure of his female servant, and a young psychiatric doctor, persuaded to be entitled to “cure” Moha’s soul, using the modern equipment he brought from Europe. Finally, it is the modernity that kills Moha, not admitting the presence of the jester to whom an ancient tradition granted immunity to speak truth against power. His

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 87.

¹⁶ Driss Chraïbi, *Civilisation, ma Mère!...*, Paris: Denoël, 1972.

¹⁷ Another text by Chraïbi, this time openly autobiographical, speaking about the same experience is the volume of memories: Driss Chraïbi, *Lu, vu, entendu*, Paris: Denoël, 1998.

¹⁸ Tahar ben Jelloun, *Moha le Fou, Moha le Sage*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978.

fate is very similar to the one that expects a young revolutionist. Both die tortured, even if the objective seems to be opposite in each of the cases. The revolutionist is forced to speak; the *rawi* is “treated” by electroshocks in order to make him silent.

The madman speaks beyond the alternative between Islam and Europe. As it becomes clear after his burial, when people gathering by his grave maintain that a feeble yet audible whisper comes from beneath the ground, Moha incarnates the ancestral voice of the earth. It is a voice located outside the history, differing from the past of the father and from the future of the doctor. This ancestral earth that speaks admits coexistence and plurality. Moha establish alliances with a Jewish madman Moché, with Harrouda, a kind of Berber witch who lives in a cave, and with a mysterious Indian, who appears in the novel without any apparent reason; maybe he represents another “wild West,” quite similar to the Maghreb as the west end of Islamic and Mediterranean world.

The problem of local culture oppressed again and again by civilizations coming from elsewhere (the Islamic one in the 7th century, and the European one later on) appears also in *Une enquête au pays*, by Driss Chraïbi.¹⁹ The earth, this local “substrate,” that the subsequent generations of policemen sent from a capital or another try to control, is destitute not only of means of defending itself, but also of name. Its weakness includes the oral character of its expression, the fragility of voice, opposed to the power that writing concedes to the great civilizational languages, Arabic and French. Supposedly, many readers could be tempted to interpret such a novel as a kind of Berber cry for freedom against the dominating Arab and Arabic-speaking culture, becoming a local substitute for previous, colonial domination. But in fact the matter is more complex than this. The subtle identity located somehow beneath the dualism of Arab and French remains unnamed, beyond such simple categories as “Berber,” “Moroccan,” “Maghrebian” etc. This missing designation cannot be based neither on ethnic categories nor on regional (geographical) names. Neither on religious identification. Neither can it be pinpointed by the idea of a clash between tribal and national models of identification. What is it then? Perhaps a tangent category, going across and breaking through these systems of categorization. This unnamed identity has a composite nature, formed by intricate and intersecting layers. It is hard even to enumerate its ingredients: not only Jewishness, Berberness, nomadic and city-dwelling Arabness, but each of these taken as a composite notion in itself, lived and understood as a tribal community of blood and usage, and at the same time as a solidarity of neighborhood and a community of destiny.

But let's return to the former question of choosing a literary language. Why should the French-speaking public be acknowledged with affairs of such a kind, seemingly so distant and so exotic, if considered from a Parisian perspective? Most probably, the choice of French language and the cultural difference that it connotes results, at least for some writers, from the search of a specific freedom. Such may be the case of *L'Amende*,²⁰ a controversial novel (supposedly) written by a female author hidden

¹⁹ Driss Chraïbi, *Une enquête au pays*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1981.

²⁰ Nedjma, *L'Amende*, Paris: Plon, 2004.

behind the pseudonym of Nedjma.²¹ As declared at the beginning of the novel, this vision of eroticism is traced in the name of the Islamic tradition that brings deepness and richness to this particular aspect of human life. The choice of French as the language of expression permits to establish a space of dialogue between civilizations. But, surprising as it could seem in this context, also Nejma writes against the modernization, showing how it brings disastrous consequences to love, couple life and finally to the erotic experience itself. It is only at the end of the novel, after the return to their own cultural background, that Badra and Driss rediscover authenticity, previously falsified by the modernizing aspirations nurtured by the man.²² At the same time, it still can be argued that this daring novel is written in French, because, as it may seem to many, it is just “inconceivable” to tell such things in Arabic.

Nonetheless, *L'Amende* is not only a cry for freedom of expression concerning female erotic experience, but also an important note on the problem of designating identities. The heroine feels exasperated by the fact that her lover, a physician educated in Europe, obstinately calls her “a typical Arab woman,” even if he knows very well that she is in three quarters a Berber. But in fact Driss doesn't mention her ethnic origin at all; by his comments on her “typically Arabic” character, he plays – ironically? – with the system of “orientalizing” stereotypes deeply rooted both in colonial and post-colonial mentalities. As it seems, the modern doctor willingly appropriates blurred categories imposed by European symbolic violence. He does so, because he sees in them, paradoxically, a perspective of development, while sticking to the traditional Arab – Berber dualism is perceived as anachronism and an obstacle on the way towards that what he regards as the only realistic option: thinking about the future of his country in terms of national identity based on the ready-made pattern of European nations.

What matters here is not only the female identity of Badra. Driss disavows his own identity as well, accepting also for himself the “orientalizing” categorization imposed by the European mental supremacy he admits. Recognizing himself as an Arab libertine and developing his gender identity according to this imaginary pattern, he inscribes not only his lover, but also himself into a system of stereotypes defining an “Oriental,” a “typical Arab man.” This choice, apparently deliberate, remains characteristic to the Mediterranean in which colonial ways of thinking persist in spite of the end of empires.

Finally I should return to *Les Boucs*, the early novel by Chraïbi that I mentioned at the beginning. In its own way, this book is as violent and daring as the erotic disclosure of Nejma. It also explores the same problems posed by the abusive designation, crystallizing into a distorted form of identity and self-consciousness. Chraïbi's hero, Yalaan, is often called “Noraf” due to the norms of political correctness established in the

²¹ The true identity of the writer is not revealed, allegedly for safety reasons. Even during the interviews transmitted by French television, her face and voice are electronically distorted to prevent her from being recognized.

²² Instead of marriage and transference of *mahr* (marriage gift), that would be deplorably “traditionalist” in his eyes, Driss decides to bestow on his beloved woman the independence he associates with profession and work. Nonetheless, Badra, in spite of having a job, remains emotionally and sexually enslaved. As she is merely a lover, her situation is more precarious than that of a spouse.

meanwhile. Nevertheless, he remains an Arab in the pejorative sense of the term imposed by the “orientalized” vocabulary and, what is more, another man who plainly assumes what is implied in the phrase he repeats: “voilà l'Arabe, le seul, le vrai” (“this is the Arab, the true and the only one”).²³ According to this summary expression sounding like a profession of faith, being an Arab is all what the “orientalist” prejudice dictates: backwardness, limitation, innate deficiency.

Yalaan is a victim of double abuse: the colonial and the post-colonial, as he belongs to the category of displaced workers, tempted into a trap by the appeal of falsified values associated to the notion of civilization. Chraïbi's novel is to be quoted among the texts founding the line of criticism concerning the “seduction of civilization,”²⁴ continued later on, among others, by Tahar ben Jelloun in *La Réclusion solitaire*.²⁵ The promise of abundance, announced by colorful posters decorating the office where the workers were recruited, remained unfulfilled. Many of them, at least in first generation, never improved their living conditions, even if referred to the African standards. The main modernizing claim, that of progress, wasn't realized neither in the material nor in the spiritual sphere. The migrant workers, destitute of their human dignity and the social inclusion they could enjoy in their original context, became absolute losers. The appeal is transformed into a corrosive disenchantment, still associated to the notion of civilization. Chraïbi might seem pitiless in denigrating his own compatriots; nonetheless the bitterest criticism is reserved for something else. According to Gabrielle Marx-Scouras:

In *Les Boucs*, Chraïbi is less interested in documenting the abject conditions of North Africans in France than he is in bringing down the presumptuous but shaky edifice called “high civilization” by juxtaposing it with the presence of 300,000 “Butts.” By emphasizing those on the periphery of respectable society, Chraïbi reveals the limits of supposedly universal values – the liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, and human dignity that are proclaimed as the birthright of all peoples only to be denied to many of them in the real world.²⁶

The early “Noraf” workers were drained into Europe as the cheapest workforce, coming handy in the specific conditions of the post-war reconstruction; but soon they ceased to be useful and became the “human waste,” according to Baumanian terms. Chraïbi's hero participates fully in this precarious existence. He leaves the prison only to be confronted with illness and imminent death of his only child, in a situation of extreme social isolation and material deprivation (he does not even possess as little

²³ Driss Chraïbi, *Les Boucs*, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁴ I propose the notion of seduction as complementary to the notion of symbolic violence; the notion of temptation is, in my opinion, one of the key elements that permit to understand the relations of power in colonial and post-colonial contexts. In some measure, the idea of the victim charmed by the oppressor is already present in Bourdieu's vision. Nevertheless, different forms of appeal and, on the other hand, situations of what looks like willing consent or spontaneous fascination deserve a careful enquiry as potential cases of hidden abuse and manipulation. Cf. Ewa Łukaszyk, “Imperial Seduction and ‘Meek’ Forms of Symbolic Oppression,” in: *Silent Intelligentsia. A Study of Civilizational Oppression*, ed. Jan Kieniewicz, Warsaw: Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies “Artes Liberales,” 2009, pp. 108–123.

²⁵ Tahar ben Jelloun, *La Réclusion solitaire*, Paris: Denoël, 1976.

²⁶ Gabrielle Marx-Scouras, “A Literature of Departure...,” loc. cit., p. 137.

– and as much – as a coin to call the ambulance for the dying child). On the other hand, the novel presents another traumatic event: a collective murder committed by a group of immigrants. They kill the contractor who refused to employ them. The members of the group simultaneously stick their knives into the body of the victim. At the moment of this nearly mythical crime, the solitude of each of the alienated individuals is transformed into a kind of deficient community. The murder becomes, at the same time, an act of vengeance and a “foundational” sacrifice. The group is tied together by one of the strongest bonds – the blood shed in cooperation.

This newly constituted community is devoid of any background, any identity rooted in the past. Immigrant workers don’t represent none of the traditional tribes; they are neither Arabs nor Berbers, neither Moroccan nor Algerians; nor even people coming from any determined country or region. They are nothing but a post-colonial hotch-potch. They can identify only with the most hazy division in the taxonomic system, a zero class emptied of any positive meaning. But quite suddenly, in consequence of their “foundational crime,” they emerge as a kind of coherent micro-community. An identity just starts to outline. Surprisingly enough, given the context, appears the claim of literary expression.

Yalaan, as he is, among the marginalized workers, the one who speaks the best French, decide to become a writer. The novel written on recycled waste (spare sheets of paper, pieces of cartoon and similar material) represents the hope of getting a “copyright,” understood not only as a promise of a monetary gain, but also as the right of entrance into the non-marginal zone of the society. Literary papers seem to be a kind of substitute documentation that the *sans-papiers* could exhibit in order to gain full humanity and to reject the condition of this liminal being that Giorgio Agamben calls *Homo sacer*.²⁷ For this reason, penetrating into the sphere of writing becomes indeed a vital necessity, a chance of survival. No wonder that the text is divided in three parts referring to the institutions of writing and print: *Copyright*, *Imprimatur* and *Nihil obstat*.

Nonetheless, the aim of the desperate act of writing that Yalaan undertakes at the death of his child is not only that of getting a *nihil obstat* from the dominating cultural power. Literature is not to be reduced neither to a badge to show off nor to a shibboleth facilitating access into the society. The utmost importance of the literary experience is still related to the task of finding the missing designation of identity. A new category of people is already there, indelibly stigmatized by the blood. The question is how should they call themselves. They have no name and they know they are not satisfied with just being named by others. The chosen strategy consist in inverting the logic of euphemism. The writing hero doesn’t look for labels which could increase the dignity of the group, but tries to reflect the reality, i.e. the state of extreme moral and material deprivation. He chooses the term *les boucs* – the goats – proposing as their totem an animal which is not only meager, stinking and provoking repulsion, but also brings the disquieting connotations of scapegoat.

²⁷ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995.

In this way, the writing hero initiates the process leading from categorization imposed by the external conditions towards a conscious and deliberate self-designation, and, in a larger perspective, a possible emancipation. The prospect starts from a pitiful name connoted with spite and shame and points to an arduous task of building the dignity which could give a positive content to the word. It is clear that Chraïbi proposes to proceed exactly the opposite in relation to the practitioners of the political correctness, who establish a shortcut between label and dignity, trying to ascribe increased status to the marginalized and underprivileged groups just giving them a dub that sounds elegant. In fact, these groups, under the renewed labels masking unsolved problems, still remain at the margin of their social context. Dignity given as a favor by the dominating side, dictating the discourse of the political correctness, is rather a carnival mask than a *persona* in the Roman meaning of recognized social and juridical capacity, the quality that, according to Giorgio Agamben, is denied to the marginalized (*servus non habet personam*).²⁸

The belief that the dignifying appellation can be the prime mover of changes often reveals to be deceptive. It is nothing but a new word proposed to convey the old meaning. The change is possible only if the conceptual layout is to be modified. The label is secondary and, contrary to the assumptions of the political correctness, any word can be as good as any other. Why not the Goats? The healing power of the designation lies in individual identification with the label, to the point of taking responsibility for it and accepting the share in the task of filling it with positive content.

The political correctness is the speech of the privileged addressed to the marginalized, not the language that the oppressed could use to speak about themselves. From the point of view of the underprivileged groups or those who found themselves in the situation of the "human waste," the solution consists in adequate mapping and giving names unmasking the reality. Unfortunately, the interest of the dominating part is often better served by euphemisms, misleading categorizations and the right amount of chaos in our ways of speaking. The hegemony is safely maintained as long as it is possible to make people see the world through rather fuzzy taxonomies. The vehemence of the Chraïbian writing, avoiding the temptation of the euphemism, is projected as a clarification, acting in favor of those who, in different parts of the contemporary world, still remain in the unspeakable and unnamed condition of "human waste," not only in the outskirts of society, but also in the outskirts of language.

Résumé

Étiquettes et dignités. Désigner l'altérité dans les pays méditerranéens postcoloniaux

L'article est une tentative de lecture des romans de l'écrivain marocain Driss Chraïbi, tels que *Les Boucs* (1955), dont l'expression littéraire est particulièrement crue et violente. Cette intransigeance devient compréhensible dans le contexte des discours manipulateurs, remplis d'euphémismes, contre lesquelles Chraïbi se propose d'écrire. Le but de cette entreprise d'écriture, but qu'on peut retrouver aussi chez d'autres auteurs marocains, est la découverte soit d'une appellation adéquate d'une identité, soit d'une représentation adéquate de ses dimensions cachées. De cette manière, la littérature créée au Maroc et dans le contexte des immigrants nord-africains, choisissant la langue française

²⁸ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, "Identità senza persona," in: *Nudità*, Roma: Nottetempo, 2009, pp. 56–65.

comme son moyen d'expression, essaye de vaincre de multiples conditionnements, liés autant aux traditions locales, au passé colonial et, de l'autre côté, au « fardeau de l'avenir », constitué par la modernité.

Streszczenie

Etykiety i godności. Określanie inności w postkolonialnych krajach śródziemnomorskich

Celem artykułu jest próba odczytania wyjątkowo surowych i gwałtownych w swym literackim wyrazie powieści marokańskiego pisarza Drissa Chraïbiego, w szczególności *Les Boucs* (1955). Bez-pardonowość jego pisarstwa staje się zrozumiała w kontekście manipulacyjnych i eufemistycznych dyskursów, przeciwko którym Chraïbi się zwraca. Podstawowym celem literackiego przedsięwzięcia, jaki można odnaleźć również u innych autorów północnoafrykańskich, jest znalezienie adekwatnej nazwy dla tożsamości lub uobecnienie jej nienazwanych wymiarów. W ten sposób pisarstwo tworzone zarówno w Maroku, jak i w warunkach imigracyjnych, decydujące się na wybór języka francuskiego jako środka wyrazu, próbuje przełamywać wielorakie ograniczenia związane z ciężarem lokalnej tradycji i z przeszłością kolonialną, ale także z „brzemieniem przyszłości”, jaki wnosi perspektywa modernizacji.

